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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 001386

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: CONTROVERSIAL KONTUM PASTOR FANS RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY

REF: HANOI 2886

1. (U) On November 4 post received from EAP/BCLTV an electronic copy of letter from Kon Tum Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh dated October 26 containing two highly inflammatory allegations:

-- in late September, Kon Tum provincial police detained and tortured seven new converts for three days, forcing them to sign documents renouncing their faith; and,

-- in mid-October, police in the town of Pleiku (located in the neighboring province of Gia Lai, some 40 kilometers from Kon Tum) detained four pastors affiliated with a local Mennonite church and, after four days of "unrelenting pressure," forced them to sever their ties to the Mennonite church and to renounce their faith. Per reftel, Pastor Chinh has been involved in a land dispute with Kon Tum authorities, which led to the demolition of his home, which he used as a house church, on September 20.

2. (SBU) Two reliable religious contacts in HCMC and in Gia Lai Province -- which borders Kon Tum Province -- told us November 4 that their understanding of what occurred in Kon Tum and Pleiku belies Pastor Chinh's claims. With regard to the Kon Tum incident, our contacts can confirm that the seven individuals were summoned for police questioning over a period of four days because of their relationship with Pastor Chinh. They were allowed to go home each day after questioning.

3. (SBU) Our contacts told us that -- as far as they understand -- there was no police effort to compel renunciation of faith in Kon Tum. Rather the police ordered the seven not to assemble in unauthorized locations, but rather to worship in recognized churches. Our HCMC source added that he has been in regular contact with Pastor Chinh and that, during these conversations, Pastor Chinh has never made any allegations of forced renunciation. Neither source has any information regarding police brutality in Kon Tum.

4. (SBU) Our Gai Lai contact -- based in Pleiku -- told us that the church and the four pastors that Chinh mentioned in his letter were not affiliated with the Vietnamese Mennonite church, but with the officially-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). According to our contact, after Chinh met with the four SECV members, the police summoned the four for "informational interviews". There was no police brutality, according to our Gai Lai contact. He added that the SECV is "upset" that Pastor Chinh is muddying the waters in Pleiku, particularly as it has been making progress in building a better relationship with local authorities.

5. (SBU) Comment: The fact that two reliable contacts, both of whom have been critical of the GVN practices on religion in the past, are at odds with Pastor Chinh speaks volumes. Pastor Chinh appears to be increasingly willing to distort the truth in an effort to agitate for greater religious freedom in Vietnam. In the process it appears that he is not only bringing down the wrath of local authorities on himself and his followers, but also threatening to undermine the efforts of other religious groups in the sensitive Central Highlands.

WINNICK